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SUBJECT Interview With Admiral Bobby R. Inman

DIANE SAWYER: The Soviets have intimated a number of possible excuses for what happened with that Korean plane; one, that it was a spy plane, and also that they mistook it for a spy plane, all adding to the confusion over the events of last week.

To help try to clear up some of that confusion, we asked Admiral Bobby Ray Inman to join us this morning. Many people consider him the ultimate intelligence professional. He is former Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, former Director of the National Security Agency, and he joins us from Austin.

Admiral Inman, thank you so much for coming in this morning.

ADMIRAL BOBBY RAY INMAN: My pleasure.

SAWYER: Let's start with what the Soviets have said in the past. Do any other countries use passenger planes for spying purposes? Is it possible that that's what this one was doing?

ADMIRAL INMAN: On rare occasions, some countries may well have used passenger planes. In this case, I'm very confident that the Koreans were not doing it.

First, it was nighttime. The equipment to do nighttime reconnaissance, infra red, or side-looking radar, is

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very expensive. Very few countries manufacture it. They would have had to have gotten it from this country. So, I discount any potential that that 747 was equipped for nighttime photo reconnaissance over land.

SAWYER: Do you think from the pattern of events there's any possibility that the Soviets mistook it for a spy plane?

ADMIRAL INMAN: Well, they're clearly going to work hard trying to -- to let the rest of the world believe they mistook it. In addition to tracking every aircraft that flies anywhere near their periphery, they also monitor what goes on. Commercial airplanes retain contact with the International Flight Control Center -- Anchorage and Tokyo for the 747. Military reconnaissance aircraft, as a safety measure, because of our high priority for human life, stay in regular communication with communications facilities. There's no question that the Soviets distinguish them on every occasion.

If both airplanes had left Anchorage within two or three minutes of one another, they might have been confused for as long as ten minutes. Well before the point that there was an intrusion over land space, they would certainly have sorted out the difference between identity of the aircraft.

SAWYER: Again, from your observations of the past of the pattern of events in the Soviet Union, do you have a theory about how high up the decision was made? Do you think it was made in Moscow?

ADMIRAL INMAN: Diane, I really don't know. My speculation probably differs from that of some of the others. I believe in the wake of the '78 incident where the Soviets were so determined not to have another situation in which their air defense appear to perform so poorly, and that they set up not only a lot more investment in their air defense system, but more rigid controls.

If you're not going to let an aircraft escape, where events move very rapidly, then the odds are high that the rules of engagement would permit a decision to destroy it out in the forward area. But one should never forget in this case that that Soviet air defense system flows a steady (sic) volume of traffic back to Moscow.

There's little doubt that officials in Moscow monitored it all the way along, and if they'd wanted to issue an order to prevent the activity they would have had time to do it.

SAWYER: Little doubt that in Moscow they monitored it?

ADMIRAL INMAN: No doubt that they monitored it. But there was a steady flow of what was going on.

SAWYER: One final question. A lot of people have been wondering if there were U.S. reconnaissance planes in the area, if indeed they crossed the path of the flight at one point, could they not have seen -- should they not have seen that it was being trailed by Soviet fighters and it was in trouble?

ADMIRAL INMAN: As I understand the time -- the time sequence, the crossover was much before reconnaissance aircraft -- the fighters came up to look at the airliner. If they were in the very immediate vicinity, 10, 20 miles away, they would have seen the activity. Even a hundred away, it's doubtful.

SAWYER: Admiral Bob Inman. Again, our thanks to you so much. Some of the questions addressed this morning.